



Kaleidoscope

Volume 7

Article 13

September 2015

1880s Day Dress

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Recommended Citation

Gregory, Corey (2008) "1880s Day Dress," *Kaleidoscope*: Vol. 7, Article 13.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol7/iss1/13>

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I am a senior Theatre major at the University of Kentucky. My primary focus in my major is Costume Technology. I plan to continue my studies in Costume Technology at graduate school once finished with my undergraduate degree. Throughout my time in the Theatre department I have had the opportunity to be taught by Robert Haven, the Costume Technician in the Theatre Department, some very useful embellishing skills that are becoming a dying art for costumers.

These techniques include hand embroidery with silk and cotton floss and tambour beading. I am currently learning more advanced costume construction techniques from Nelson Fields, the Costume Designer in the Theatre Department.



Faculty Mentor:

Professor Robert Haven, Theatre Department

This embroidery and costume construction project grew exponentially over a matter of days, when Corey asked for some practice embroidery projects to do over the winter break. I knew she was capable of undertaking such an advanced project that was filled with the challenge of complex pattern matching, symmetrical draping, and period embellishment. Creating this dress by itself was closer to a graduate level activity, adding a layer of hand worked embroidery set it apart from the norm.

In addition to the actual construction of the project, Corey investigated the history of clothing at that time. The combination of both the research and the fabrication of the garment provided a unified experience and understanding of the time period and how clothing reflected the everyday culture. The simplest of details, such as cording the bottom hem, become important when one realizes that in the 1880s few streets were paved and this cord provided protection from the dirt and wear.

Corey's construction skills and attention to detail are unsurpassed, as is evidenced in the careful matching of the damask fabric across very difficult pattern shapes on the bodice. Her embroidery skills are equally polished and ones that will serve her both professionally as well as put her in a prime position to attract the attention of major graduate programs in costume technology. She has a keen eye for good design, highly developed sewing skills, and a passion for the work, a winning combination in the professional costume industry.



1880s Day Dress

The 1880s Day Dress and Embroidering project emerged when I wanted to practice specific embroidering techniques over last year's Christmas break. First I would like to talk about some of the history behind the dress. There are many useful sources that discuss the Victorian era clothing. Arnold (1984) is a great source that provides wonderful illustrations of the construction of women's garments from 1860 to 1940. Additionally, it is important to know that during this time period "ornamentation of dresses, coats, and wraps became very lavish with silks, braids, frogging and embroidery" (Cassin-Scott, 1971). Arnold (1984) also explains that day dresses can be referred to as "promenade dresses." Another source states that the day dresses were an important part of society in which they were primarily used for daytime social calls (Colman, 1972).

The process for creating the day dress first started with developing an embroidering design. I began by researching different embroidering books, including Nichols (1974) and Houck (1978). These great resources provided wonderful insight into what a good embroidering design should look like. After finding a suitable design for the dress, I modified the embroidering design in order that it could fit the particular areas on the bodice that I wished to embroider. Then I selected a cranberry wool crepe fabric on which to embroider the design. After tracing the bodice pattern shapes on the fabric I had to transfer the embroidering design onto the fabric as well. Once finished tracing I stretched the fabric with the design onto a frame. The embroidering design was accomplished using cotton floss; I used four different kinds of stitches: split, satin, stem, and french knot.

For the construction of the bodice I had to lay out the pattern onto fashion fabric, trying to make the most of the damask fabric. I flat lined the pattern pieces for the bodice. I then applied the embroidering to the areas on the bodice and hand finished them. Once finished, I began assembling the bodice and laid the pattern out for the skirt. Because of having a limited amount of fabric, I had to make the most efficient use of the brocade, so I used a straight to bias technique for the underskirt. For the hem of the skirt I used cording; doing this helps protect the underskirt and it also gives more body to the dress.

The over drape of the dress is done in a deep green wool crepe. I draped a piece of muslin over the underskirt and began pinning each drape I made. Then I took the muslin off but still pinned from where I had draped it and traced the pattern of the draping onto fashion paper. From there I placed the pattern onto the wool crepe and began marking with pins where the drapes should be. I placed the fabric back onto the manikin and re-draped where the original folds were.

Embroidering and other forms of hand stitches (tambour beading and Japanese silk embroidering) are an endangered art. I have been fortunate enough to learn a lot about these hand stitching skills from Professor Robert Haven. He is continuing to teach me more advance techniques in this type of art, which will help when there is need to embellish costumes and to make them more authentic to a particular time period. Being able to gain this skill will assist in keeping the art alive. Also these hand stitches will provide my portfolio with a variety of skills that will help in future career opportunities in film, television, historical reproduction, and theatre.

Works Cited:

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Corey Gregory and the finished Day Dress

Coleman, Elizabeth A. *Changing Fashions 1800-1970*. New York: Sanders Printing Corporation, 1972.

Houck, Carter. *White Work: Techniques and 188 Designs*. New York: Dover Publications, 1978.

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Embroidery detail

Front view



Right side view



Cuff detail



Bodice detail



Rear View



Rear detail



Figure 1. North Atlantic Conveyor Belt

Based on: North Atlantic Conveyor Belt. Chart. BBC News Website. Environmental Correspondent Richard Black. 30 Nov. 2005. 08 Nov. 2007. <http://www.thewe.cc/weplanet/news/people/abrupt_climate_change_event.htm>

Figure 1 illustrates the flow of the North Atlantic Conveyor Belt. The red arrow indicates warm water that is carried by the Gulf Stream from the equator. The yellow arrows designate the water in the process of cooling; some of the warmth of this water is being transferred to the air around Western Europe. The sinking regions are areas where water becomes too dense to stay in surface currents. The blue pathway represents cold water that is moving in the direction of the equator.